

Gabriella Walfridson
A60 Literary Seminar
Autumn 2005
Department of English
Lund University
Tutor: Birgitta Berglund

Fictional Sisters

An examination of sisters and sisterhood
in *I Capture the Castle* and
The Brontës Went to Woolworths

Contents

General Introduction	1
Sisters in Fiction – a survey of earlier research	2
Middlebrow fiction and society in Great Britain between the Wars	6
The Eccentric Family	9
Sisters and Sisterhood	14
The Sister Plot	20
Conclusion	25
Works Cited	27

General introduction

From earliest times stories have been told about the male hero going on quests; to slay the dragon, to save the kingdom and marry the princess, or perhaps to battle evil and destroy the magic ring. Fathers and sons have left their homes in countless tales to fight destiny and save mankind. But what about the women they left at home; the mothers, daughters and sisters that must have been there too. Are there no stories about them? This essay will not examine the role of the Mother, who does indeed play an archetypal role in mythology, instead it will observe the role of female siblings and question their place in narrative history. If we examine the Western mythological canon we will find that there are quite a few stories about sisters. The sisters are seldom the main protagonists, but they are there, in the background, and their relationships form an ongoing thread in the literary tradition. Early Greek myths like those of Antigone and Ismene, Psyche and her deceitful sisters, the seven sisters that are the Pleiades and the three sisters of the Hesperides; the Bible's Martha and Maria; Shakespeare's Bianca and Catherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Cordelia, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* and folk tales like *Cinderella* and *Snow White and Rose Red*, all form an important legacy of sisters in mythology and fiction.

This is a legacy that seems to finally come into its own at the birth of the novel. Because something seems to have changed through the course of history. When women started to write novels in the eighteenth century it resulted in that the everyday life of those women that stayed at home when the hero left for his adventure started to appear in the novels. The formerly private arena of family life became public in new and interesting ways. Among these new sister stories we find that most influential family of sisters, the Bennets, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. They stand out like the "shining beacons" of women's fiction that Virginia Woolf wrote about¹, together with the March sisters in *Little Women*, and the real life Brontë sisters, who entered popular consciousness as almost mythological creatures in their own right. All subsequent literature with sisters as protagonists seems to enter a conscious or unconscious relationship with these sisters.

The genre once derogatory named "Middlebrow Novel" of the early twentieth century is full of stories about sisters. The genre has now become more respectable, or at least noteworthy in academia and the word "middlebrow" has perhaps lost some of its negative connotations. It can be described as the popular fiction of the informed

¹Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*, (42)

middle-class during the four decades from the 1920s to the 1950s. This genre dominated the publishing market during the period and was largely written and read by women. Existing parallel to the Modernist movement it certainly shared an awareness with the Bloomsbury culture of the time, but probably had more in common with the Victorian Family Novel and that narrative tradition. This makes the genre relevant for this essay. The notion of belonging to two worlds, obsessions with class, domesticity and gender and the fact that so many of the novels within the genre have sisters as main protagonists are other important aspects. This essay will take a closer look at the groups of sisters that populate two such novels, Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1949) and Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* (1931). The two novels were both popular in their time, and they serve as typical examples of the genre. Both novels have eccentric families as the main focus point. The families share similar experiences and ideals and the novels both also clearly enter into the earlier mentioned relationship with those "shining beacons" of sisterhood, Jane Austen's novels and the image of the Brontë sisters. This makes my parallel readings of the novels relevant for this essay.

I am interested in exploring the dynamics of sisterhood as an important narrative aspect. Sisters mirror each other both within and outside the family. They can serve as convenient character types with distinct capabilities, strengths or weaknesses, while the family setting makes for excellent possibilities of chamber drama but also for great scenes of affection and sacrifice. But there is also a possible destructive side of the family, a darker theme of entrapment and illusion that runs back to the Brontë connection. This essay will follow the different paths of sisterhood in both novels and investigate how they interact with and discern themselves from earlier ideals.

Sisters in Fiction – a survey of earlier research

In the late 1970s several ground breaking feminist literary critics published major studies on women's fiction. With the feminist movement came a new interest in the "forgotten" history of women writers, the idea of "herstory" and a new approach to literary theory. In Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the role of women in fiction was examined again and again.

Elaine Showalter was mainly interested in "herstory", in rediscovering the "women writers celebrated in their own lifetime (who) seem to vanish without trace

from the records of posterity”². She has been both hailed and criticised for the idea of a female literary canon existing in parallel with the established one.³ For this essay her chapter on Virginia Woolf and Woolf’s relationship with her sister Vanessa Bell has been especially important, but also her idea of literary sisterhood. The chapter on ”Feminine Heroines: Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot” mentions ”the sense of connectedness”(101) female readers created with fictional characters, a possible way of escape from the confines of family life through a fictive sisterhood. These imaginary sisters remain important for the novels I will examine in this essay.

Gilbert & Gubar continue in this vein in their study, where they discuss the dark side of the woman writer and, in extension, the confinement of family life. They see a ”female schizophrenia of authorship”(78) within the female literary tradition, where the women authors struggle with ”their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them.”(ibid). Their ideas on authorial intent have been criticised quite thoroughly by e.g. Toril Moi⁴, yet there are many other fruitful concepts that deserve credit in their work. I have found inspiration in their readings of both Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë and also relevance in their discussions on the development of female character growth within the mentioned authors’ novels.

The last of the major 1970s feminist studies that has been fundamental for this essay is Nina Auerbach’s *Communities of Women* from 1978. Auerbach begins with examining several mythological female ”communities” like the Graie, the Gorgons, the Muses and the Amazons. These secluded groups of women lead on to the idea of sisterhood as an ”anti society”, something outside the ordinary world of family life and patriarchal society. Sisterhood seems to be something both natural and created, an ideal that can be both threatening and appealing. Auerbach compares the attitudes of British and American writers to all-female societies. She finds a more tolerant and almost positive conception of female colleges and utopian communities in nineteenth-century America. In Britain there was talk about the ”shrieking sisterhood” and even a proto-feminist like Mary Wollstonecraft found something threatening in ”knots of young women”(18), something almost unhealthy in all-female friendships Yet, when Auerbach examines first Jane Austen’s and then Louisa M Alcott’s and Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, she finds other ideals within the all-female sphere. Sisterhood brings power and stability, but also isolation.

² Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. (54)

³ Elaine Showalter gives a good survey of the critique in her ”Introduction – Twenty Years on” in the 1999 expanded edition of *A Literature of Their Own*.

⁴ Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. (56ff)

Louise Bernikow, in her study of female relationships, *Among Women* from 1980, writes about the two-headed inheritance and tradition of sisterhood in Western myth and intellectual canon. She complains that even if there exists a “myth of devotion” in the literary canon, “most women are shown deep in antagonism”⁵ and she continues to state that “the particular conflict of female siblings is more marked by the blood they have in common and it is almost always the specific conflict over men.” Of course, the sources she refers to are mainly written by men. Bernikow wants to challenge the traditional canon, and she writes; “Remove the man from the room.(..) When women write about sisters, the myth of devotion returns.”(77) Bernikow is not really a literary scholar, but her work is cited in most of the later literary studies on sisters and *Among Women* seems relevant mainly for her focus on female relationships.

Moving into the 1990s and our own 2000s, several literary studies about sisters in fiction have been published. Amy K Levin, in *The Suppressed Sister* from 1992, points out a problematic aspect of Auerbach's *Communities of Women*; “when literary critics talk about blood sisters, they tend to slide into a discussion of non biological sisterhood. (..) Auerbach portrays the family as porous and extended; she makes little distinction between biological sisters and sisters by choice. Crucial differences in the two kinds of relationships are erased.” (15) Levin is more interested in the relationships of “blood sisters”, “blossoms on one stem” as she christens her introductory chapter, but she is fascinated by the ambivalent use of both “sister” and “sisterhood” as literary terms. She studies the “disparity and visions of sisters and sisterhood” in both 19th and 20th century novels. As always, Jane Austen's novels are among those examined. Helena Michie's *Sororophobia*, also from 1992, stresses the idea of 'difference'. She asks “why should the concept of sisterliness not include, among other elements, competition and envy?”(9) and she questions the idea of “political sisterhood that emphasizes love between and unity among women”(21). Narrative sisterly relations contain both anger and love.

Patricia Dunker's *Sisters and Strangers* from 1992 is more radically feminist than any other work used in this essay. Her book is a study of contemporary feminist fiction, but it is relevant for this essay in its analysis of sisterhood as a feminist idea. Dunker shows that sexual politics has particular relevance within the family. The sexual politics theme is explored in Diana Wallace's study from 2000, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914-39*. Her study places the subject of sisters in the same time period as the novels examined in this essay, but most importantly, it explores “the

⁵ Bernikow, Louise. *Among Women* (76f)

female plot of rivalry between women” (2). Wallace reverts the traditional ”erotic triangle” of man-woman-man and instead examines the use of the ”female identified erotic triangle”; what happens when two women love the same man. This theme is relevant for at least one of the two novels I have studied in this essay. Female rivalry can be destructive but also something constructive, according to Wallace. It can help the creative process and also lead to new bonds between women. There is a ”tension between similarity and difference” which Wallace examines in several inter-war novels, and also the question of both locating oneself as a woman writer within a literary female tradition and ”marking difference from earlier writers” in one's texts (8).

Sarah Annes Brown, in *Devoted Sisters* from 2003, has studied representations of sisters in nineteenth-century British and American fiction⁶ and she talks about how “sisters have both an individual and a collective identity” (Brown, 2). Brown identifies several typical characteristics among the literary sisters she dissects; (a) there seems to be a “need to find her own niche” (ibid, 3), something that contrasts one sister from the other, which leads on to (b) “the invitation to make a choice of some kind”(ibid, 5), often between domestic happiness or a career. This points toward (c) the power struggle between the sisters, an often passive-aggressive one, with sacrifice of one kind or other as the weapon of choice. Finally there is (d) the physical difference between the sisters, with one dark and one fair sister. I will examine Brown's ideas in this essay and see if they can be applied to 20th century literature as well.

⁶ Browne, Sarah Annes. *Devoted Sisters – Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature*.

Middlebrow fiction and society in Great Britain between the Wars

“Like most uneducated Englishwomen, I like reading – I like reading books in the bulk.”(*A Room of One's Own*, 103)

After the First World War Great Britain was a changed country. Perhaps as many as one in ten of all British males under 45 had been killed in the war and the already large female majority had increased from 1.3 million in 1914 to 1.7 million in 1921⁷. This points at the “uneven” impact of the Great War, “both between class and sex”⁸. The war had created new arenas for women to work in, and their newfound freedom could not be repressed.⁹ On the “home front” the lack of men meant that fewer women got married, that among the middle-classes more women had money of their own since there were no men left to inherit the “family funds”, but also that women from the middle-classes had to search more actively for employment outside the family arena.

The shortage of men after the war was felt not only in factories and in the agricultural industry, but also in the world of publishing and culture. Nicola Beauman cites several women writers of that time in her study of the woman's novel between 1914 and 1939, *A Very Great Profession*, to whom the changed climate meant that at least the more commercial parts of the literary world were open for them. According to Beauman e.g. Ivy Compton-Burnett wrote that before the war “there were four or five men novelists to one woman, but that in the time between the two wars there were more women”(6). Novel writing was a suitable job for a woman, with a long tradition of earlier women novelists, but the result was still judged to be “specifically female fiction”, novels written *for* women *by* women. The Victorian legacy was hard to shake off, and much of the literature these women writers produced share an obsession with class, family and domesticity.

In the 1920s new economical aspects of society evolved; a continuation of the industrialisation of the pre-war era with greater concentration on mass production, distribution and consumption.¹⁰ This was felt in the cultural arena as well; the commercial aspects of novel writing converged with the changed social world and the

⁷ Hayes, Michael, “Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste” in Bloom, Clive. *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, 1900-1929*. (81)

⁸ Nicola Beauman writes that over 700,000 British combatants were killed in war, among them 37,000 were officers; Beauman, Nicola. *A Very Great Profession*. (35)

⁹ Indeed, their war effort was in a way rewarded by the Representation of the People Act in 1919, when all women aged 30 or over were granted their right to vote.

http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage/a/intl_timeline.htm, 2005-12-08

¹⁰ Radway, Janice. “On the Gender of the Middlebrow Consumer and the Threat of the Culturally Fraudulently Female”, (871) *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93:4

new, more egalitarian class structures. This produced a new creature, the "culture consumer". Janice Radway describes them as "an increasingly visible group of consumers who enthusiastically bought the diverse products of a growing industry devoted to the marketing of 'culture' (872). These people were what came to be called the "middlebrows", the women and men of the middle classes who followed the Book-of-the-Month lists in newspapers, subscribed to book clubs and lending libraries and were generally interested in keeping up with modern culture but perhaps, at least from the highbrow's perspective, a little too reliant on the opinion of others on what to consume. Thus, the word "middlebrow fiction" came to carry a certain stigma, an uncertainty of where these novels belonged in the literary tradition.

The genre, if one may call it so, is that of the "woman's novel", and as Nicola Beauman writes, these are novels "usually written for middle-class women by middle-class women" (Beauman, 3). "Middlebrow" refers to both the fact that these novels were produced and consumed by the growing Middle Class and also that they belonged neither to the literary avant-garde, nor the mass culture of the working-class. The sophisticated intellectual and elite "highbrow" culture, which in the 1920s almost had become synonymous with modernism and the modernist writers in Bloomsbury, was personified in e.g. Virginia Woolf. The "lowbrows", and their culture of the masses, "insisted on love interests and happy endings"(Trodd, 48). Trodd goes on to say that "many women writers expressed their alarm at the anomalous popularity of the romantic novelists in a period of political and educational advance for women (120). Distancing oneself from the lowbrow, but perhaps even more, from the middlebrow became a necessity for the "serious" writer.

Yet there seems to have existed a certain acceptance of the lowbrow culture among the highbrows¹¹. It might have been the fact that lowbrow culture did in no way try to be anything else than what it was, entertainment and diversion for the masses. The middlebrow literature, on the other hand, was a threat against the highbrows, standing with one leg on each side of the fence. As Nicola Humble describes it; "The middlebrow novel is the one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the

¹¹ See Q.D. Leavis and her *Fiction and the Reading Public* from 1932 for a contemporary questionnaire she sent to sixty authors on "the condition of the reading public of to-day", where several of the more highbrow authors admit to a fondness for detective stories, and as a reaction to some of their opinions on "bestsellers" Leavis notes "the fascinated envy of an ever-intellectual novelist for the lower organism that exudes vital energy as richly as a manure heap"(63). This might in a way reflect more on Leavis than the highbrow authors, she certainly seems slightly troubled with the popular fiction of her time.

other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort“ (Humble, 11). Humble writes about the modernist novel and how Joyce and Woolf and their use of experimental narrative forms needed to be distinguished from “more conventional fictional narratives”. She says that “it is not (as many critics would have us assume) that novelists and particularly female novelists, suddenly started writing meretricious, class-obsessed fripperies in the years after the First World War, but rather that the status of the realist novel was dramatically altered by the coming to public consciousness of the modernist and associated avant-garde movements” (Humble, 11).

In short, middlebrow fiction ended up placed in the shadow of the more literary avant-garde, forgotten or at least over-looked by critics but in its time loved and admired by a large reading public. Anthea Trodd calls this polarization of culture “the categorization of writing by the heights of brow” (Trodd, 47ff). To call the expanding market of women’s fiction ‘middlebrow’ was an attempt by the established literary world “to naturalize this new market within existing constructions of class, and also within a narrative of a continuous literary tradition” and “to explain and control the centrality of women writers in this expanded market: much reference to heights of brow is gendered, though not consistently”(47).

Nicola Humble's book *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s* from 2001 breaks new ground with her ”rehabilitation” of the feminine middlebrow. She does a fascinating study of literary themes in a large number of popular novels from that period and places these “forgotten” novels in the literary canon of earlier women writers. One of the chapters in her book examines the eccentric family; as a source of ”destructive neuroses” (149), a cage that keeps the women bound both to the house and to each other, but also where family life functions as a creative and safe environment for the mainly female members. She finds a sense of the family ”as a bizarre institution” in many of the novels, a recognition of the large family as something soon-to-be obsolete, but still seductive. The family theme is one of the important links to the past, the heritage of the Victorian novel, which plays such an important role in the concept of the Middlebrow Novel and its obsession with class, tradition and domesticity. To recognize the middlebrow novel's place within the literary tradition remains one of the focus points of this essay.

The Eccentric Family

The family novel was certainly no new concept when it became a popular theme in middlebrow fiction. As I wrote in the introduction to this essay, family life was explored in many novels in 18th and 19th century Britain and America. I have mentioned both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* as examples of those earlier fictional families. What was new with the approach to family life in middlebrow fiction, at least according to Nicola Humble, was an interest "in exploring a new conception of the family – seeing it as a profoundly eccentric organisation"¹². Humble sees the earlier 18th and 19th century fictional families as "however dysfunctional, (...) invariably imagined as representative parts of the societies around them, as microcosms of social problems and developments"(78). Families may have their internal problems, but the *idea* of the family was never questioned. The families in middlebrow novels are instead "depicted as *other* than the societies outside their front doors – they are eccentric, self-conscious units, establishing a familial identity through private games and invented languages"(77). The focus is often on the daughters of the families, in their late teens and twenties, struggling to find their role in society but trapped in their family setting. The parents' generation is not as important as the children's, and many of the families have distant fathers and dead mothers. This *otherness* of the family in middlebrow novels mirror the dichotomy of the genre itself, both offering an alternative creative environment compared to the rigidity of society but also confining the family members within a closed circle.

Both *I Capture the Castle* and *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* certainly live up to the new approach to family life that Humble writes about. The Carne family in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* has much in common with Jane Austen's Dashwood family. Like the Dashwoods they consist of a rather vague, youngish mother and three daughters; Deirdre, Katrine and Sheil. Their father died some years ago and now they live together with Sheil's governess in a London townhouse.

Deirdre works as a journalist and moves between highbrow and lowbrow culture quite effortlessly. She writes a novel and is the driving force behind most of the Carne family's private fantasy games. The Carnes have a large group of fantasy friends that pop in for tea and dinners. They are a motley selection of characters, ranging from an

¹² Humble, Nicola. "Eccentric families in the fiction of adolescence from the 1920s to the 1940s" in *Childhood Remembered: Proceedings from the 4th Annual IBBY/MA Children's Literature Conference at Roehampton Institute London*, 1998. ed. Kimberley Reynolds. (77)

old doll, a sea-side performer and the judge Lord Toddington. Some of them are real life characters (like the judge) who the family have transformed and drawn into family mythology. Deirdre certainly stands with one leg in a very adult world and one in the schoolroom. She has a nostalgic obsession with childhood and "spend all the time [she] can in the schoolroom"(15) with her much younger sister Sheil; as she says "It takes one's disillusion away like magic"(13). The nostalgia for the past and her rich fantasy life make Deirdre seem rather immature at times, yet she is also described as "the man of the family"(37), since she is the one with a steady income from her writing.

Katrine, the eldest but less self-assured sister, is in her second year of drama studies. She is not very good according to the school, and is in fact asked to leave quite early in the novel. Instead she joins the chorus of a revue on tour of the provinces with a little help from Deirdre's comedian friend Mr Pipson. Katrine is on the verge of leaving the family and their made-up fantasies, but she too struggles with one leg in the safe haven of family life and one in the great world.

Sheil, the youngest sister, is also the one most affected by the strange world of make-believe that the Carnes have created. Sheil doesn't go to school, and is very much indulged by the rest of the family. She never questions the existence of any of their fantasy friends, and it is Sheil that has the most physical experience of when the 'ghosts' of the Brontës appear. She seems to be hindered from leaving childhood by the rest of her family, they do not want her to grow up too fast.

The Carne family consider themselves very modern and enlightened. They move in very eclectic circles, from Deirdre's journalist and theatre friends to their new friends Lord and Lady Toddington. They can "go slumming", as when Deirdre and Katrine visit the chorus girls backstage at one of Pipson's shows, but when Katrine later writes to tell her mother and sister that she has fallen in love with Mr Pipson, there can be no question about her accepting his proposal. Mr Pipson's background as thoroughly working-class makes it impossible for the Carnes to make an alliance with his family. As Deirdre writes, Pipson himself is one of "nature's gentlemen" and would be at home anywhere, but his close relatives would be impossible to present to her friends. Class remains an unavoidable chasm between people. The Carnes idealize and play with popular cant and sayings, yet through their breeding always know what is the expected 'correct' way of doing something according to the norms of society. They remain a product of their class and background even when they welcome contact with others outside their usual sphere. This obsession with class places the novel very much in the

middlebrow tradition. There is a current of change running through society in the novel, but in the end status quo is upheld when it comes to social roles.

Moving on to the family in *I Capture the Castle*, the Mortmains are another example of an eccentric family. If the Carnes were eccentric in their actions rather than their way of life, the Mortmains' eccentricity is based in their very strange choice of house. The father of the family, the author of a modernist master-work called *Jacob Wrestling*, has rented an old castle to get away from modern society and find inspiration for his creative work. In the crumbling ruins of both the castle and the family he and his two daughters, one son and his newish wife try to survive the lack of money, food and furniture. Cassandra Mortmain is his 17-year-old younger daughter and the narrator of the story. She writes three different journals throughout the story, which form the structural framework of the novel. Cassandra, like her namesake in Greek mythology, seems to have an uncanny gift of prophecy. What she merely hints at in her journal, later comes to take place. She wants to "capture" her family's life and conversations in her journals.

The father has stopped writing and that is the source of the family's precarious financial situation, since the whole family depend on his ability to support them. Instead of writing, he shuts himself up in the gate house and reads detective novels. His wife Topaz is a 29-year-old artist's model who has had two husbands before. She is very beautiful and ethereal, yet practical and does her best to feed the family. Cassandra is very fond of her and sees her more like an older sister. Cassandra's real sister, 21-year old Rose, has a more complicated relationship with Topaz. Rose desperately wants to leave the castle but cannot think of a way out. She says "it may interest you both to know that for some time now, I've been considering selling myself". But as Cassandra points out, where could she possibly "go on the streets in the depth of Suffolk"(10f). The only possible solution is of course marriage.

The last two members of the extended family are the two boys, Stephen and Thomas. Thomas is the 15-year-old biological brother of Cassandra and Rose, while Stephen is the son of their former maid. When his mother died he had nowhere to go and now he has become part of the family. As a character Thomas never really evolves past the annoying-younger-brother stereotype, even if he has one or two tell-it-like-it-is insights. Stephen on the other hand provides both romantic interest and an insight into class perspectives. In the early stages of the novel Cassandra describes him as "very fair and noble-looking but his expression is just a fraction daft" and "always been rather

devoted to”(12) her, but as the novel evolves, so does he. He steps in as a surrogate breadwinner for the family, showing great loyalty and generosity. Like the sisters, Stephen is on a journey of self-discovery and he struggles to break free both from his place in society and from his unrequited love for Cassandra.

The two eccentric families have much in common. Their class, background and education are rather similar. They are intellectual families, with at least some highbrow pretensions, yet move quite easily within both lower and higher social spheres.

Both families have absent fathers, physically in the Carne's case since their father died several years ago, possibly in the first World War. The Mortmain father is absent in a more psychological way, he has abdicated from his expected role as leader of the family and hides away from society in the gate house. This breach with patriarchal norms creates a different power dynamics within both families. As I wrote earlier Deirdre sees herself as the man in the family, she has taken on a leading role when it comes to interactions with the world outside the family. In the same way Cassandra and Rose are forced to make their own way into society by their father's isolation. In this way the families in both novels create that liberating space Nina Auerbach wrote about, a predominantly female community where they can find strength in each other. So the novels describe both positive and negative aspects of family life. The central problem for the eccentric family seems for me to be a self-enforced isolation and the creation of a world of their own, separated from society and proud of it.

The other absent adult in both novels is the mother. For even if the Carne's mother is very much alive and part of the three sisters' everyday life, she does not take on the obligations and educational roles expected of a mother. She never discourages her daughters in their imaginative fantasy games, nor does she tell them off for harboring prejudices towards e.g. Mr Pipson. Instead she encourages their behaviour and is often the instigator for many of the family's fantasies. She joins her daughters as an equal, a sister in her own right. The Mortmain family's situation is slightly different, since their biological mother is dead. Yet the same sister relationship between parent and children that the Carnes have, exists between the stepmother Topaz and the Mortmain daughters. The 'mothering' that has to be done in both families comes from the outside, from women with different attitudes and less eccentricity. The female members of the families exist in a limbo of waiting and uncertainty. Their isolation makes them dependant on each other, and strengthens the bonds of sisterhood. It also leads to a blurring of roles; mother becomes sister and vice versa.

In both novels the traditional role of the responsible mother is filled, or at least tried to be filled, by women from outside the family. Miss Martin, the governess in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* plays a complicated role in the Carne's family household. She is baffled by the strangeness she meets, yet seduced by the possibilities of fantasy. She struggles with her own family problems, her own absent sisters, and the would-be-lover the parson. She is the one that sees the dangers of the make-believe world for Sheila and she is the one that wonders at the family's way of talking about Mr Pipson. It is also telling that in spite of Deirdre's role as an author, it is Miss Martin the ghosts of the Brontës come to visit in London. They are not interested in the Carnes, they are the guardian angels of their own heroines, the lonely spinster governesses.

For the Mortmains the mother figure comes in the sensible shape of Miss Marcy, the village librarian. Early in the novel she arrives as an inventive force and answers Cassandra's tentative cries for help with their financial situation with - "I'm sure you're all much too artistic to be really practical. Let's hold a board meeting!" (19). Miss Marcy admires Mr Mortmain above all and asks if she may bring him some biscuits when she understands how little food the family actually have. As town librarian she brings the newest detective novels to the castle, and she finds the family wonderfully bohemian. She has much more understanding for the Mortmains' eccentricity than Miss Martin has for the Carnes' in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, yet they come from the same stock of 'excellent women'¹³ for whom practicality comes as second nature. Miss Marcy is not as important for the plot of *I Capture the Castle* as Miss Martin is for *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, yet she is worth acknowledging as an important complement to the group of female characters in *I Capture the Castle*.

¹³ See Barbara Pym and her novel *Excellent Women* from 1952. It is from an later era but definitely belongs to the same tradition of women's novels.

Sisters and Sisterhood

One of the problems with discussing 'sisters' as a literary phenomenon is the ambivalence in meaning of the term 'sister' itself. I referred to Amy K Levin's discussion earlier, about the often blurred line between 'blood' sister and 'chosen' sister in literary criticism. Levin discusses the linguistic attributes of 'sister'¹⁴ and how the secondary meaning "marks an absence; the term reminds us of what is not (a biological relationship) as well as of what is"(16). Thus there seems to be a more sinister side of the usually positive word 'sisterhood', disguising a chasm that a 'chosen' sister never can breach. I have already hinted at the confusion, indeed almost fallen into the same mix of meanings when I discussed the boundaries of sisterhood within the two novels; how the mothers become sisters. They turn into the secondary meaning of 'chosen' sisters. I would like to explore this theme further and see how the different groups of sisters interact, both within the biological sisterhood but also across those borders, how they perhaps try to create other 'chosen' sisterhoods. Especially *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* uses this device in its storytelling.

Miss Martin, the governess who sometimes acts as a scolding mother, gets her own story and place in a biological sisterhood in chapter six of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*. She writes a letter to her eldest sister Flossie, who still lives with their father in Cheltenham. Miss Martin muses that "the Pater must have a daughter at home. It was cheaper than a second servant"(tBwtW, 56). The town is important, since it is just the place Deirdre earlier in the novel mentally placed Miss Martin's family in. Cheltenham also has a reputation of being a "respectable" and "wealthy" town, and this places the Martins with in a sociological class context¹⁵. Since the father, a retired Captain, has been forced to retrench¹⁶ the family's living costs, the younger daughters have all left home to earn their keep outside the family. Miss Martin's younger sisters work respectively as paid companion for an old lady, and schoolteacher at a girls'

¹⁴ "No doubt one source of the confusion is linguistic, because a single word, sister, describes two dissimilar bonds. Both words, *sister* and *sisterhood*, are metaphors, but they signify on different levels. When the word sister is used to describe a member of a sisterhood or a sister by choice, its meaning is more abstract than when it is used to describe a biological sister; dictionaries give the former meaning as secondary, explaining that it is a bond as or like that between biological sisters." (Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, 15)

¹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheltenham> (2006-01-24)

¹⁶ The word 'retrench' is used on page 108. Perhaps another parallel to the earlier families of literary sisters. I think of Mr Eliot and his need to retrench in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, the word is used at least two times in chapter 2.

school. Miss Martin has her sisters' photographs in her room and tries to keep the family together in this way. She "knew her own portrait was represented in the two other bedrooms she would never see: in Bournemouth (Mabel), in Hampshire (Violet). Flossie's alone was dearly familial."(ibid). The three chapters in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* told from Miss Martin's perspective open up the chasm between the Carnes' situation in life, and that of the Martin sisters. Originally from the same comfortable middle class background, the Martins have come down in life. Miss Martin exclaims "What a mercy she herself was a Newnham¹⁷ woman!"(107), when she thinks back at her family's hardship. Thanks to her education she could always earn her keep as a governess.

Miss Martin feels strongly for her sisters and worry about their situation in life. She sends half her wages back to Flossie when one of her other sisters' employer has died and forced the sister to return home. After her summer holiday visit at Cheltenham, she realizes that she, in the eyes of her father and stay-at-home sister, has changed roles from part-of-the-household daughter to that of what she describes as "in the future, they were to be beloved visitors"(107). Miss Martin's exclamation of "What a year!"(ibid) might hint at the relatively recent occurrence of the Martin family's fall of grace, even if she later writes about earlier postings. The very next part of Miss Martin's musings captures her and her sisters' loneliness:

Unfamiliar railway stations, one's trunk marooned on the platform. And all over the country, Violet and Mabel on platforms, too, wondering what their bedrooms were like? For that was, now, what mattered most...(107)

Their future is indeed bleak and uncertain. All they can do to keep together as a family and a group of sisters is to write letters, keep photographs on mantelpieces, and possibly help each other financially when work is hard to find.

Another problematic relationship among the sisters in *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* is that between Miss Martin and the Carnes. This falls into the second category of sisterhood, that of the 'chosen' sisters. Miss Martin is worried about the family she works for, they are "weird", as she writes to her sister. She wants to understand them and make a good impression, yet their behaviour does not match her

¹⁷ Newnham College was the second college at the University of Cambridge to admit women students. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newnham_College

expectations. She is the one that recognizes the dangers of too much fantasy for Sheila. She writes - "I shall have to be extra careful to be commonplace, and try to bring her to see that there is plenty of mirth in everyday things – more than in fanciful things which never could possibly happen"(55) in her letter to Flossie. The closeness of the Carnes' family circle makes Miss Martin into an obvious outsider, and she will never be able to enter their sisterhood. Their actions are too bohemian, too 'fantastic' for the down-to-earth Miss Martin. As she writes, the Carnes:

were an incalculable family. Kind, in many ways kinder than any of her previous families, but, somehow, having the effect of making one want, as never before, to have a long chat with Flossie, or to set out on a good walk with Violet and Mabel... (111f).

When Miss Martin tries to interact with the Carnes, her own sisters are always there in the background. She misses them, and longs for something else. The kindness of strangers can be unbearable, and lead to those situations where nothing but a lonely cry remains: "Miss Martin began to cry. She remembered to muffle her face, because Deirdre had caught her, once before" (114)

Yet the Carnes' eccentricity seems to have affected her more than she admits, since Miss Martin too indulges in the Carne family's pretense games. She dreams about her childhood friend, the curate Mr. Francis and has written a letter to herself from him, where, "in phrases well-expressed, if a little stilted, he offered her marriage (105). When Miss Martin finally breaks free from the Carnes, it is to Mr. Francis she flees. She is offered a job as his secretary at the Settlement for the poor that he now works for. Miss Martin manages to escape the dreary role of governess, and there is some hint at a newfound happiness for her, perhaps a new 'chosen' sisterhood with the women who do voluntary work at the settlement. Yet overall, Miss Martin and her sisters remain the tragic anti-heroines of the novel. They might have their guardian angles in the Brontës, but like the Brontës they are doomed to separation and loneliness, dreaming of absent sisters in unknown bedrooms.

When it comes to the Carnes' relationship to Miss Martin the one sister who tries to reach out and draw her into their midst, even if rather reluctantly, is Deirdre. Deirdre's literary ambitions makes her think about other people's situations in life. She

"sees" how Miss Martin and her sisters were forced to leave their homes, and fantasizes about that family's situation. She is the one who suspects Miss Martin's unhappiness, she approaches Miss Martin when she thinks she hears her cry in her room, but the chasm is yet again too deep for them to understand each other. It is as if Deirdre unconsciously tries to create a sisterhood with Miss Martin, but when she realizes what she was about to do, she turns back. The Carnes' mother seems to regard Miss Martin as a necessary evil, a visitor from the outside world that somehow never really belongs. Deirdre writes how their mother "always [acted] a little self-conscious with Miss Martin"(75). Sheil's relationship with Miss Martin is more fleeting, since she almost lives in her own fantasy world. She is a precocious child who takes on her biological sisters' opinions about the world, and ergo Miss Martin. Katrine, for her part, seems to harbour an unresolved anger towards governesses in general and she calls Miss Martin a bore. She cannot understand her sister Deirdre's reluctant fascination with "what she calls the Martin's Rogues Gallery of portraits" (140) where as Deirdre sees the photographs in Miss Martin's room as clues to her life. On the whole, for the Carnes' their own sisterhood is enough. Any outsiders who try to enter without being invited will be ignored. They are safe and content within their world, at least until the last group of sisters in the novel, the Brontës, appear as restless spirits on the Carnes' holiday in Yorkshire.

These sisterly 'ghosts' of the Brontës within the novel do indeed stand for something dark and threatening to the status quo of middlebrow life. Nicola Humble mentions the Brontës as "a model of the potential of the female creative imagination"¹⁸, and one of the first eerie manifestation of their presence comes when Deirdre finds pencil notes in the rejected novel manuscript, which she brought with her to Yorkshire. It seems like Charlotte Brontë herself has been there and notated Deirdre's book with some rather negative criticism. Even before that, the Brontës' dog, Keeper, has started to play with the Carnes' dog, and at the pub where the Carnes rent their rooms for the holiday, there is a red haired young man who talks to himself and seems to drink too much. He is, as they later realize, Bramwell Brontë who haunts the bar room. However, when the Brontës make contact with the modern characters it is significant that the first

¹⁸“The Brontës stand for something darker, but also perhaps more attractive: they function as a model of the potential of the female creative imagination, but also as a grotesque example of the limitations of the domestic environment as a source of women’s identities. In particular, their co-operative creation of a fantasy world becomes emblematic of a neurotic social disengagement that is the threatened final result of both fictionalising and families.” (Humble, 1998, 88)

sister they try to talk with is Miss Martin, and not the ingenious Carnes family. She is the one the Brontë sisters address first in the table turning game - "*Agatha* (...) *Where have you been?*" (75). This is quite telling in the relationship between the Brontës and the others. Time and again it becomes obvious that Miss Martin is the one who the Brontës care about. She shares their fate in life. Still, there seems to be some sisterly concern for the Carnes after all, since the next thing during the table turning session concerns Sheil and her health. Sheil has been suffering from a severe cold and will not stop coughing. The warning from the Brontës goes; "*Go back. (...) Go back. (...) Remember Maria. Remember Elizabeth. (...) And remember Anne*"(76). These three names refer to those Brontë sisters who died from tuberculosis. Both the Carnes and Miss Martin seem uncertain about who they are receiving the message from, yet the Carnes take the advice seriously enough and leave Yorkshire. During the table turning session the Brontës tell the Carnes that they will come and visit in London. This visit later comes to be a culminating event for them all.

The Brontës are the group of sisters who transgress the boundaries of biological sisterhood and actively 'choose' new sisters. When they finally arrive in London they see Miss Martin as one of their own. They see and acknowledge the sisterhood of the Carnes, but they are not interested in joining them. For them, the hardworking, lonely governesses and schoolteachers are the ones in need of support and companionship. When Deirdre learns from Sheil that "the spectacles one went into Miss Martin's bedroom and they talked"(194), her reaction goes; "*Miss Martin certainly hadn't deserved this, confound her*"(ibid). Whether she deserves it or not, Miss Martin's meeting with Charlotte Brontë inspires her flight to Mr. Francis and his settlement for women in need. Miss Martin later thinks back on the strange visit and the "weird sort of woman, Miss Bell"(200) who wondered "is the post hour a time of torment to you, too?" and violently said "It is detestable work!"(201) about teaching. It becomes the final straw that sets Miss Martin free, both physically and mentally. Just before she leaves she tells Sheil off for living in a fantasy world, and reveals some hidden truths about one of the Carnes' favourite characters, Mr Saffryn, who has died in real life and whose passing away has been kept from Sheil.

For the Carnes, the visit has other connotations. Sheil has been visibly shaken, both by Miss Martin's hurtful words, but just as much by apparition of the Brontës on the staircase, and especially the one who was cruel to her dog. A nice parallel to the fact that just before the visit, Sheil was reading Gaskell's biography of the Brontës and

commented about the Brontës' dog that "Emily – the cross one – was a beast to him once, and I got fed up with all of them"(183). To rectify Sheil's trauma Deirdre has to look for help outside the family, at the Toddingtons. It is Lord Toddington who 'solves' the manifestations of the Brontës in Yorkshire, and who names the red-haired boy as Branwell. It is also Lord Toddington who tries to turn the Brontës' visit into something Carne-centric with his "Hasn't it occurred to you that Charlotte and Emily were drawn to you, as a family, by a happiness they never had themselves?"(211). Yet I would claim that it is Deirdre who sees their visit for what it really was - "I think the attraction was Miss Martin. She didn't fit in, either, as a governess"(210).

The Carnes' relationship with the Brontës can never be more than that of an admiring audience's with some literary giants. The Carnes will remain spectators, or rather readers of both the Brontë family and their oeuvres. By finally domesticating them into their everyday fantasy world, as Lady Toddington does when she says that she saw the Brontës in Woolworths just before Christmas, where they bought everyday things like a hair net and writing-pads, the Brontës no longer threaten the stability of the Carnes' family circle. Disarmed by social niceties, the Brontës have joined another "neurotic social disengagement" to quote Humble yet again.¹⁹

The distinction between 'biological' and 'chosen' sisters is much less important in *I Capture the Castle*. Here we meet two blood sisters who mirror each other in different ways. They do have an honorary sister in Topaz, the stepmother I discussed earlier. Yet, the theme in *I Capture the Castle* is more centred on isolation and creativity in itself instead of as a way to create or distance one selves from new sisterhoods. What is present in the novel is the acknowledgement of *literary* sisterhoods. Cassandra and Rose wonder what would be nicer; to live in a Jane Austen or a Charlotte Brontë novel. Cassandra prefers the Brontës, and wants both to write like the Brontës and be one of their characters. She is described by the vicar as "Jane Eyre with a touch of Becky Sharp"(134). Most importantly though, Cassandra shares a double sisterhood with Jane Austen, since her name is the same as that of Austen's own sister. All through the novel there are references made to earlier canonical sisters. Especially Austen's characters and plots seem to flourish. Several times the Mortmain girls see themselves as the Bennet sisters, but at least Cassandra wonders if they do not differ a little from "those five Bennets at the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, simply waiting to raven the young men

¹⁹ One can argue that the domesticated Brontës who join the Carnes' fantasy world, differ from the Brontë ghosts present in the earlier parts of the novel. Those Brontës, with their interest in Miss Martin did not fit into the Carnes' world, therefore the Carnes remold them into something else.

at Netherfield Park, [who] are not giving one thought to the real facts of marriage (67). As she continues, "no stepchild of Topaz's could be" (ibid) ignorant of such things. The Mortmains may be desperate for change, and marriage is probably the only way out for them, too, but Cassandra has other ambitions. She looks more for sisterhood with the Bennets' author than with the Bennets themselves. When trying to find peace for her writing, Cassandra says - "I am not quite Jane Austen yet and there are limits to what I can stand (32). She sets her goals high, aiming for the career of the very grandmother of women novelists.

The Sister Plot

The very beginning of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* comments on the abundance of sisters in women's literature²⁰. Two branches of 'sister' novels seem possible to define within the genre – one with one or several large groups of sisters, the other with just a single pair of sisters. The first kind of novel, of which I count *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*, uses the sister theme to create a large palette of different female characters. Each of them has one special skill or personality trait which defines her; e.g the witty one, the alcoholic one, the silly one, the writer, etc. These novels often stress the importance of finding ones place within the group and how to take on a specific role in a family of several sisters. In *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* we have Deirdre as the clever one, Katerine as the dramatic one and Sheil as the Child. The different roles help to define the others and together they make up a 'whole' idea of sisterhood. As the opening part of *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* suggests, the different sisters within the novels also present different ideals for the readers to identify with. The reader must 'choose' which one to side with, and by so doing, distancing herself from the others²¹. The obvious link here to earlier literary sisters is the Bennet sisters.

²⁰How I loathe that kind of novel which is about a lot of sisters. It is usually called *They Were Seven*, or *Three – Not Out*, and one spends one's entire time trying to sort them all, and muttering, "Was it Isobel who drank, or Gertie? And which was it who ran away with the gigolo, Amy or Pauline? And which of their separated husbands was Lionel, Isobel's or Amy's?" Katrine and I often grin over that sort of book, and choose which sister we'd be, and Katrine always tries to bag the drink one. (*tBwtW*, 7)

²¹ There is an interesting discussion about this in Amy Levin's *The Suppresses Sister*, 21.

The second kind of novel fits more closely to many of the earlier myths and fairy tales I mentioned in my introduction to this essay. This is a story of two sisters who are each others' opposites, sometimes good friends but just as often dearest enemies. Here the sibling rivalry often becomes most pronounced, with sisters fighting over the same goal, almost always a man. Into this category I count *I Capture the Castle*. As in the first category of novels, the sisters play a special role within their sisterhood. Yet since it is a *pair* of sisters instead of a larger group, the roles are wider but also more clear. In the novel a bipolar relationship is constructed both in the sisters' looks and their natures. Cassandra and Rose are defined by their very differences; with Rose being the pretty, blonde, and impulsive one, whereas Cassandra is the plain, mousy-haired, and clever one. It becomes clear early in the novel that this is an exaggerated difference, since Cassandra is quite lovely herself, it is only in comparison with her sister that she loses out.

Both Amy K Levin and Sarah Annes Brown have mapped out what Levin calls "the sister plot" and Brown calls "typical characteristics among literary sisters". Their theories are especially applicable on *I Capture the Castle*. I have presented Brown's four points of characteristics in my presentation of earlier research. Brown starts with the idea of a "need to find her own niche" between the sisters, which certainly is true in *I Capture the Castle*. Cassandra has her niche staked out from the very beginning, with her opening words "I write this sitting in the kitchen sink"(5). Cassandra is the narrator of the story, the creative sister, the supposed writer of the three journals which form the text of the novel. She struggles with her literary ambitions, striving for her father's approval yet distancing herself from the more highbrow aspects of his writing. She wants to capture the everyday life of her family, not write another modernist masterpiece. Rose on the other hand has no special talent which defines her. She has a pretty voice, but when they try to come up with any practical skill which she could help out the family's financial situation with, nothing can be thought of. The only thing she is good for is marriage. Rose becomes a commodity, defined by her availability on the marriage market. She is pretty and charming, and she knows it. Those are her strengths and she will go to any lengths to win herself, and by association, her family a better situation in life.

Brown's second characteristics is the idea of "the invitation to make a choice of some kind". In *I Capture the Castle* especially Rose, but also Cassandra, is forced to make life changing decisions at the climax of the novel. Rose's choice to follow her

heart over her mind and run away with Neil, thereby abstaining from the larger wealth and position offered by the marriage to Simon, is typical for this kind of plot device. Rose's choice is also a way for her to redeem herself from the mercenary ambitions she had in the beginning of the novel. Her quest of getting a husband and bettering her economical situation in life is fulfilled after all, but not in the resplendent way which it would have been if she had stayed with Simon. Cassandra's choice is more emotionally difficult. She decides not to go with Simon to America when he asks her, since it isn't for the right reasons. Her love is not reciprocated, at least not in the same way, and therefore impossible.

Brown's third characteristic is perhaps the most interesting one; "a power struggle between the sisters, an often passive-aggressive one, with sacrifice of one kind or other as the weapon of choice". Here the very nature of sisterhood is questioned, where sister stands against sister in their quest for happiness. Rose and Cassandra's power struggle starts when Cassandra learns about the Cotton boys' true opinion of the Mortmain sisters at the end of the first journal. Cassandra's decision not to tell her sister about the bad impression Rose made on the Cottons is a first attempt from her side to control the situation. This is before Cassandra has any real interest in any of the Cottons, yet it is an obvious manifestation of her powers. Cassandra is the one with the knowledge of the truth, just like her namesake in Greek mythology. But Rose too plays the power game. When she learns of Cassandra's true feelings concerning Simon, she knows and tells Cassandra that it would not make any difference if she stepped away from the marriage to Simon. Her leaving would not make Simon love Cassandra anyway. When Rose does leave Simon after all, it is not because of her sister but for her own sake. Cassandra in her turn struggles with the knowledge that Rose doesn't really love Simon. She wants to tell Simon the truth, yet cannot hurt him in that way. After her visit to London she writes that "nothing will ever be the same again between Rose and me"(307).

Brown's final characteristics of the physical distinction between the sisters has already been touched on with Cassandra's definition of herself as so much plainer than her sisters. It is interesting to note that Rose is the fair and beautiful one, the role usually kept for the 'good' sister. Rose is not exactly the bad sister, but Cassandra is the heroine of the novel, and instead of the 'beautiful wronged one' character-type, Cassandra can be sorted into the relatively 'mousy' category. In this way she joins her fellow literary sisters Jane Eyre and Lucy Snow, both typically 'plain' heroines of

Charlotte Brontë. Another heroine who is perhaps not 'mousy' but certainly 'plainer' than her sister is of course Elizabeth Bennet. Like Cassandra, Elizabeth is "tolerable, but not handsome enough" to tempt Mr. Darcy the first time they meet. It is quite obvious though that Elizabeth is still a pretty girl. It is only when compared to her sisters that she loses out. The same is true for Cassandra, where yet again it must be stated that her plainness lies more in her own eyes than in any reality.

Levin's idea of a 'sister plot' mirrors Brown's four typical characteristics quite well. Levin has found a chronological plot in many sister stories. In the beginning there is a surface of amiability between the sisters. The story begins at a time when the girls already have rigidly separate identities. This role splitting becomes a major source of tension and a repressed desire to make a sister identical to one's self appears. Sisters try to control their siblings by exerting power amongst themselves. This is not merely an assertion of power, it also suggests that the sisters are insecure about their roles and want their siblings to imitate and accept them. This critical behavior is counteracted when one sister allies herself with the father (or a father figure). This alliance splits the sisters socially and spatially, it separates one sister from the world of women and delays her entry into the world. The role divisions break down and now the sister plot often merges with the marriage plot. The getting-of-a-husband and the choice of a good suitor is more important than the relationship with a sister. If the hunt for a husband is successful and the marriage plot works out, the sister plot, too, usually settles into a new configuration. Marriage reinforces divisions, but less in terms of personality than of class and geography – once the splitting attains a social dimension, the sisters can put aside their personal competition, allowing greater amity to exist. Each has created a life of her own.²²

If applied to *I Capture the Castle*, the 'sister plot' is quite easily identified. The story begins when Cassandra is 17 and Rose 22. They are both set in their respective roles and know what they like. The "repressed desire to make a sister identical to one's self" is perhaps harder to identify in this particular text, but there is certainly a question of controlling each other by exerting power. Cassandra's decision of not telling everything to Rose has already been discussed. One could also argue that Rose's wish that Cassandra shares her wealth of experiences in London is a way for Rose to try to mold Cassandra into her ways. Cassandra is the one who stays at home at the castle

²² For more details about 'the sister plot' see Levin's introduction and first chapter of *The Suppressed Sister*: In the first chapter, entitled "The Sister Plots", Levin makes interesting readings of several of Jane Austen's novels.

with her father when Rose and Topaz leave for London to outfit Rose for her wedding. This leaves Cassandra in a male-dominated environment. She is identified even more as the creative sister, the writer, just like her father. She also bonds with her brother, even if she realizes that he has a completely different appreciation of culture than she has. In this way Cassandra is separated from the "world of women", both ideologically and spatially. While Rose thrives in London, or at least seems to do that on the surface, Cassandra pines away in the country. When she finally visits London, it is not the success she hoped for. Instead the sisters are driven even further apart. *I Capture the Castle* does differ slightly from Levin's ideal plot at the end. It is only Rose who marries, and her marriage takes her far away from her sister. Yet it does bring the sisters to an understanding and perhaps even a forgiveness. They will not become as close as they thought they were when the story began, but both will have lives of their own, and in these lives there will be a special place for their sister.

I want to stress the importance of Cassandra and Rose's sisterhood as the reason for most of their actions. Their personalities are defined in relation to each other as sisters, both in their own eyes and in those of the society surrounding them. Their isolated way of life has forced them even closer, and to grow up and create an adult relationship with each other they have to reassess their roles as sisters. Their choices in life, how they define themselves and how they act on those choices are what bring forward a resolution. Sisterhood, even a biological one, is something organic and non-static.

Returning to *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* and the Carne sisters, their relationship is less troubled. They also define and identify themselves as sisters foremost. But perhaps the roles are easier to accept when there are three sisters instead of two. With a larger group comes more choices and opportunities to differ from 'the other'. The Carnes also lead a very different life from the Mortmains, they are less isolated from the rest of the world and thereby less dependant on each other. It might be easier to find comfort at home when 'home' isn't a prison which keeps the sisters buried in the country with no hope of a future. The Carne sisters also seem to have friends outside the family. Still, what is most striking is how shadowy these friendships are in the book. To the Carnes, like the Mortmains, the only really important relationship is the sisterhood.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to illuminate the different roles sisters and sisterhood can take within literary narratives. I have discussed the presence of sisters in literary history and especially the emergence of sisters as important fictional characters in the woman's novel. From Jane Austen's Bennets, Dashwoods and Eliots and onwards, novels have been full of groups of sisters. The genre often condescendingly called Middlebrow fiction is perhaps especially full of novels with sisters as protagonists. The style of the genre can be considered to be a continuation of the Victorian realist Family Novel tradition. I have examined two novels from that genre, *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* and *I Capture the Castle*, and tried to show how they both represent different takes on the sister plot and the use of sisters as main protagonists. My aim has been to show how these two novels belong to a wider corps of women's novels and how they interact with earlier literary sisters within that corps. I have presented several theoretical approaches to the study of fictional sisters and sisterhood, and tried to apply these theories in my readings of the novels.

The Brontës Went to Woolworths uses the plot device of having several large groups of sisters as a way of showing both differences and loyalties among sisters. The different groups of sisters have their own rules and mores for creating a strong family unit. Especially the Carne sisterhood seems to have a problematic darker side to their loyalty, where their imaginary games and fantasies distance them from reality and confine the sisters within a psychologically stifling family circle. The Martin sisters are more melancholy. Forced to support themselves outside the home, they are perhaps the most grounded family within the novel, with a keen sense of harsh reality. Their devotion to each other is shown through their constant letter writing. The final and most curious sisterhood within the novel is that of the Brontës. Their ghostly appearances haunt both the characters and perhaps even the readers of the novel. Their fondness for the underdog, hardworking teachers and governesses that often played such a secondary role in their society, disrupts the social status quo and open up darker themes behind the usually 'safe' family circle. *The Brontës Went to Woolworths* is particularly interesting in how the three different sisterhoods of the Carnes, the Martins and the Brontës are played out against each other. The groups mirror and distort one another and play with conceptions of class, education and fantasy. In this way both the

individual sisters and the groups which they belong to form identifiable roles that together make up a 'whole' idea of sisterhood.

I Capture the Castle on the other hand belongs to the other category of sister novel where a pair of sisters is the focus point. The two sisters in *I Capture the Castle* are defined by their bipolar relationship, constructed in constant comparison with each other. Their sisterhood stands as a fundamental reason for most of their actions. In a bipolar sisterhood the choice and possibilities to differ from the other sister are fewer and more regulated, compared to a larger group of sisters in which identities and allegiances can be more floating. With only one other person to mirror one another the world closes in.

All through the essay I have stressed the importance of literary sisterhoods. The Woman's Novel seems to me to be in a constant dialogue with earlier female novelists. Fanny, Jane, Charlotte, Emily, Anne, Louisa, Mary Ann, Lucy, yes even Virginia, the list can go on and on. These are novels and novelists that mirror and react to each other, and in whose pages we meet sisters, both 'blood' and 'chosen'. This 'literature of our own', to paraphrase Showalter and Woolf, written for sisters by sisters, creates a bond through generations of readers and writers. It places the passive heroines of earlier times in the centre, and shows what goes on when the usual heroes have left the building. Here more quiet battles are fought, questions of identity and self are asked and battled with. Most of all it is a place where female protagonists are expected to tell their own stories; stories that show how great a deviation there can be between and among sisters.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Ferguson, Rachel. *The Brontës Went to Woolworths*. 1931. London: Virago Press, 1988.

Smith, Dodie. *I Capture the Castle*. 1949. London: Vintage, 2004.

Secondary Sources

Auerbach, Nina. *Communities of Women*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. 1818 London: Virago, 1989.

Beaman, Nicola. *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39*. London: Virago Press, 1983.

Bernikow, Louise. *Among Women*. New York: Harmony Books, 1980.

Brown, Sarah Annes. *Devoted Sisters*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003.

Duncker, Patricia. *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 (Chapter 1 'On Writing and Roaring')

Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Hayes, Michael. 'Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste'. *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume One: 1900- 1929*. Ed. Clive Bloom. London: Longman, 1993.

Humble, Nicola. *the Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s*. 2001 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Humble, Nicola . 'Eccentric Families in the fiction of adolescence from the 1920s to the 1950s'. *NCRCL Papers 3 - Childhood Remembered: Proceedings from the 4th Annual IBBY/MA Children's Literature Conference at Roehampton Institute London*. Ed. Kimberley Reynolds. London: National Centre for Research in Children's Literature, 1998. 77-89.

Levin, Amy K. *The Suppressed Sister – A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992.

Leavis, Q.D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1932

- Michie, Helena. *Sororophobia – Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics – Feminist Literary Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Pym, Barbara. *Excellent Women*. 1952 Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Radway, Janice. 'On the Gender of the Middlebrow Consumer and the Threat of the Culturally Fraudulently Female', (871) *South Atlantic Quarterly* Fall 1994. 93:4
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own*. 1977 Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Trodd, Anthea. *Women's writing in English: Britain 1900-1945*. London: Longman, 1998.
- Wallace, Diana. *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914-1939*. London: Macmillan Press, 2000.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929 London: Collins, 1987

Internet Sources:

http://womenshistory.about.com/od/suffrage/a/intl_timeline.htm, 2005-12-08

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheltenham>, 2006-01-24

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newnham_College, 2006-01-24